Financing stalls resurrection of wildlife preserve

By Kevin Abell

LARGO—Plans for the resurrection of the defunct Wildlife Preserve, operated here by the American Broadcasting Co. for only a year and a half before it collapsed in 1976, have been stalled for nine months while investors set up financing for the project.

ABC's Scenic and Wildlife Attractions Inc. reportedly lost $17 million in the venture.

Last November, Ford Wright Jr., a backer in the new venture, said the 405-acre park on Central avenue in Largo would reopen this summer as a wild-animal preserve.

However, Mr. Wright now says the delay in financing will push back the opening date until next May. The group purchasing the land hopes to settle on the property next month.

"We're definitely going ahead with the project," Mr. Wright said. "We just didn't want to rush it."

He said another principal backer, Jim Fowler, the former co-host with Marlin Perkins of television's "Wild Kingdom," is redesigning the park.

Other investors in the project include Jurgen Schulz, one of the world's foremost wild-animal dealers, and Orla Larsen, who has completed most of the construction of animal habitats designed by Mr. Fowler.

When ABC ran the park, visitors observed the animals on a 45-minute drive through the wilds with all car windows rolled up. There were several other exhibits, including an area for petting tame animals.

Mr. Wright said he hoped the new design would keep visitors so busy they wouldn't be able to see all the exhibits in a day.

The new park—which will cost slightly less than $2 million for the land and about $3 million in renovations—will feature walk-through areas, with optional safari rides in jeeps into areas inhabited by predators such as lions, he said.

Conventional fences will be kept to a minimum to make the environment less artificial, he said. The park will have pits and other natural barriers to keep the animals away while giving visitors the feeling that they are only an "arm's reach away" from the animals.

Mr. Wright said the emphasis in the park will be attraction-type animals that tend to be active during the day. One complaint about the ABC-run park was that too many animals slept through the day while moving about at night.

The park also will have more of an emphasis on water, Mr. Wright said.

"That means we'll probably have porpoises in one pool, and build another [swimming] for people," he said. "It won't be an Olympic pool or anything, but one that will be natural-looking."

In explaining the problems with obtaining financing, Mr. Wright said hopes for a Federal Housing Administration loan fell through last April, when the backers were informed there was no more money to be lent in this fiscal year. More recently, the group has gotten "help" from Governor Hughes, who suggested using Maryland Industrial Development Financing Authority loans.

While the costs to enter the unnamed animal preserve will remain hefty, about $4 for adults, the new venture hopes to avoid the pitfalls of ABC.

ABC's problems stemmed from a lack of return visitors, poor road access along Central avenue to the park and the fact that in 45 minutes, most visitors had seen all there was to see.

Mr. Wright said since his group will not have to invest $17 million, as was the case with ABC, but rather only about $5 million, it won't need the number of visitors ABC did to turn a profit.

He said if the new preserve can draw about 500,000 visitors in a season—the average number of visitors recorded when ABC owned the attraction—it would be doing well.

William H. Natter Jr., former director of the preserve and the agent handling the sale of the land to the four investors, said the reason ABC lost so much money was that King's Dominion and Busch Gardens, both in Virginia, opened at the same time.

Those parks drew visitors away from the animal park because they, too, had wild animals, as well as other entertainment to keep a steady flow of visitors, he said.